

# *TO GO OR NOT TO GO?*

## FACILITATED LEARNING ANALYSIS



July 2013



## 1. NARRATIVE

A lightning ignited fire was started on July 7<sup>th</sup>. Three days later, a 15-speed, 4800 gallon, county water tender was ordered to replace a broken down BLM water tender. The county tender arrived at the Incident Command Post (ICP) on Wednesday to help support the fire suppression efforts. A Type III Incident Commander (IC) was in place, and was forming an ad hoc organization to fill Incident Command System (ICS) positions as needed. Later that day the 250 acre fire made a 150 acre run. The IC reconfigured his resources and began to formulate a new plan. The Operations (Ops) Chief in place needed to demob due to some illnesses on his regular crew. A new Ops Chief transitioned into place that morning, and the newly arriving Ops Chief Trainee was reassigned to take over a recently formed division of the fire. At 0700 the next morning, the county tender was given an assignment to drive to the bottom of the ridge to support the new division.

The water tender driver, lets call him Tracy, was familiar with that area but had never driven down the road that would take him to his assignment. He inquired about the road and asked if it was necessary to carry a full load of water. He indicated that he would prefer to empty his tank and refill somewhere near his assigned area once he got there. Tracy was an experienced CDL driver and was familiar with the water tender he was driving. He also drove school busses and operated large vehicles for the military. The water tender he was driving had passed two independent inspections (DOT/DNR) in March, 2013. Tracy talked it over with his Division Supervisor (DIVS) and they decided to talk to the IC about getting permission to use water at the ranch. The IC tracked down the phone number and attempted to contact the ranch below but was not able to reach them.

Tracy expressed concerns about driving by himself through a stretch of road that was a known communication dead zone. The road passed through a steep canyon with cliff walls several hundred feet high on both sides. DIVS told Tracy that he and the Log Chief were going to make the trip later that morning to shuttle meals down to the new division. They decided to convoy together to mitigate the communication issues with the assigned travel route. Tracy spent the morning doing truck checks and greasing zerks. The Log Chief and Tracy studied a map to get a better idea of the road they were about to drive while DIVS and the IC were doing a recon flight.

The recon flight ended around 11:00 and the DIVS and Log Chief indicated that they were ready to make the trip. Tracy had not yet received word regarding permission to use the water, but did not want to miss out on traveling in a convoy. Tracy felt confident that he could make the drive, but would have to take it a lot slower with a full load of water. He decided he would rather travel with a full load of water than by himself. DIVS assumed that Tracy had dumped his water. They drove a short distance to an area they called the “phone booth” and stopped

to make some phone calls and do a radio check. The phone booth was one of the few areas where you could get cell phone reception. Tracy started down the hill in 3<sup>rd</sup> gear in preparation for traveling down a grade and followed the Forest Service pickup.

**"I wasn't nervous about the hill, but I had that healthy respect."**

After they left the "phone booth" area, DIVS called Tracy on the radio and told him that he had a car heading his way. Tracy never acknowledged the radio traffic, which seemed strange to DIVS and uncharacteristic of Tracy. DIVS mentally noted the lack of response, but kept driving. Later, during the FLA process, it was discovered that Tracy was receiving DIVS's radio traffic, but DIVS's radio was not receiving Tracy's radio traffic. The vehicles followed the road through a steep and narrow decline and as he reached a flatter area, Tracy shifted up to 5<sup>th</sup> gear. As the road opened up he saw another descent and decided he wanted to be in 4<sup>th</sup> gear so he would not have to use his brakes as much. When he went to shift gears, he had trouble finding 4<sup>th</sup>. He tried to double-clutch it into gear, he tried to dry shift into gear, he tried to get it into any gear, but had no success. He called the DIVS on the radio but did not get a response. At this point he pulled the emergency (parking) brake, and was surprised to find that his tires did not lock up. He pumped his brakes, but was still gaining speed. He looked down, noticing that his air pressure was at zero psi.

**"No air, need help; what can I do?"**

Spotting an area he thought he could use as a make-shift run-away truck ramp, he immediately aimed for it. Just then a private citizen's vehicle appeared in front of him fishtailing around the corner at a high rate of speed. Both Tracy and the Log Chief had to swerve to avoid a collision with the private vehicle. Upon swerving, the water tender began to fishtail due to the inertia from the water in his tank sloshing back and forth side to side. He began his descent with a full tank of water, but had lost some of it during the drive. He was gaining on the Forest Service vehicle; the Log Chief was swerving off the road to get out of the way when the inertia from the sloshing water caused the water tender to drift into a rear-end collision with the Forest Service truck forcing it off of the road. The Forest Service vehicle hit a rock, launched into the air, landed, and jolted to a stop in some boulders against the side of the mountain. The air bags never deployed presumably due to the winch that was attached to the front bumper of the truck. Tracy saw the Forest Service vehicle launch into the air, and saw a cloud of dust. At this point the water tender was tipping over. Tracy was not optimistic of the chance that the DIVS and Log Chief survived.

**"I have 3 little girls."**

The water tender tipped over and came to rest against the side of the mountain near the Forest Service vehicle; Tracy passed out. When he awoke he tried to get his bearings, but found that he couldn't see. He felt some fluid in one eye (which he later realized was blood), and the other was full of dirt. As he tried to make sense of the situation, he noticed that the engine was still running. He reached up and turned the key to kill the motor. The DIVS saw Tracy turn the key and realized that Tracy was still alive. The DIVS had immediately gotten on the radio to announce that a water tender had rolled over and the driver was trapped inside. He did not hear a squelch tail, and was afraid that nobody heard him. He ran down the road about a mile and a half to try and find cell service or hit a radio repeater.

**"Tender rolled over, driver trapped"**

**"He's alive!"**

A potable water tender driver and his wife had been following the convoy, and provided assistance holding pressure to the wound on Tracy's head. They had a cell phone booster and were able to get cell service. They called 911 and an ambulance was dispatched out of a small town about 2½ miles down the road. The ambulance responded quickly, and made it on scene before any of the fire resources. The Ops Chief and the Zone Fire Management Officer (FMO) were the first fire resources to get on scene, and they helped care for the victims and extricate Tracy from his vehicle. The extrication took about an hour. As per the medical plan, the helicopter was launched and served as a communication repeater for the incident within the incident.

**"My kids play with his kids"**

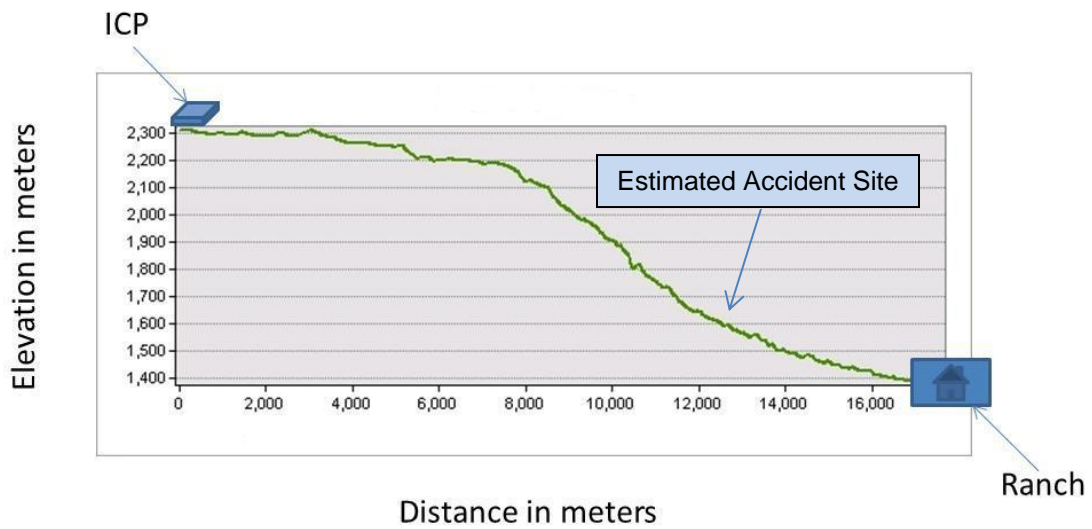
Tracy was very appreciative of the medical care he received. All precautions were taken, he was put in a C-collar, strapped to a back-board, and all three people involved in the accident were transported via ambulance to the hospital. The DIVS and Log Chief were soon cleared for release. They did not leave the hospital but instead went to check on Tracy, who received 8 staples to close a laceration on his head. He also sustained some injuries to his leg because it had been pinned between the bottom of the steering wheel, the seat, and the dashboard. He was released later that same night, and walked out of the hospital under his own power. All three accident victims left the hospital together.



## 2. PHOTOS/MAPS











### 3. LESSONS LEARNED FROM PARTICIPANTS

1. Communication:
  - a. When traveling in a convoy, if someone doesn't answer your call pull over and resolve the problem.
  - b. When you're doing a radio check, don't just trust the squelch, look at the display.
  - c. Consider cell phone boosters in all rigs.
  - d. Store traffic signs in the IC trailer so that they're readily available to communicate fire traffic to the public.
  - e. Communicate or confirm assignment before departing from ICP, don't rely on assumptions.
2. Pre-attack Plan:
  - a. Review the plan annually to incorporate any necessary updates, not forgetting areas that are not dealt with often.
  - b. Consider classifying roads for informational purposes and skill level required of heavy equipment operators (similar to ski resorts black diamond, blue circle, etc).
3. Medical Plan: Participants were relieved that a medical plan was in place, everyone understood it, and it worked well.
4. Equipment: Consider placement/use of winch so that it doesn't interfere with airbag deployment.
5. Consider having a Liaison or Public Information Officer in place when there are resources from so many jurisdictions close by or involved with the fire. In this fire at least 9 different entities were involved, and communication was a challenge at times.

### 4. LESSONS LEARNED FROM LINE OFFICER

1. When developing the letter of delegation as an Agency Administrator to the Type III Incident Commander, consider:
  - a. Recommending the need for a safety officer if there is the potential for moderate to high risk exposure during incident operations (WFDSS assessment), logistics, & aviation on an extended duration fire.
  - b. Providing a local resource advisor when overhead positions and single resource positions are unfamiliar with the area.



- c. The likelihood of transitional periods to occur in operations, organization (IMTs), logistics support, and predicted weather. Emphasize the importance of heightened situational awareness and providing additional safety procedures during those times.
- 2. Preseason planning:
  - a. Identify steep grade sections or high hazard areas of roads likely to be used during suppression activities and include as a GIS layer available for WFDSS.
  - b. Purchase cell phone boosters for district resource (non fire related) vehicles.

## 5. FACILITATED LEARNING ANALYSIS TEAM

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